

ON TRACK WITH MDT

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Tying commercial vehicle safety directly to registration has been a topic of much debate in recent years, so it should come as no surprise that a program is underway to do just that.

The program is called PRISM, or Performance and Registration Information Systems Management, and the U.S. Department of Transportation is asking if Montana wants to join. So far, six states have signed on, and the U.S. DOT is asking for a commitment from the rest of the country. Many states believe that PRISM participation may well be mandated in the future.

The purpose of PRISM is to improve commercial vehicle safety by linking the carrier's ability to register his or her commercial vehicle to an evaluation of that carrier's safety rating. In other words, under PRISM, truck registration and truck safety are no longer separate elements. Instead, the safety record of the carrier registering the vehicle is considered at the time registration or re-registration occurs. The state agency responsible for the registration transaction is also responsible for assuring that the carrier has met the required safety criteria. MDT is that agency in Montana. Ultimately, under PRISM and subject to state law, unsafe carriers could be denied commercial vehicle registration.

Is this a good thing? As with many issues, the answer depends on your perspective. Yes, PRISM is a federal computer-driven system that interacts with other federal computer-driven systems such as SAFER, MCMIS and SafeStat, but the systems that PRISM interacts with are carrier-related systems. SafeStat, for example, serves as the safety assessment algorithm within PRISM, computing a "score" and "category" for carriers with sufficient data. MCMIS captures carrier performance data like the results of safety inspections, crashes, enforcement cases and citations. SAFER electronically stores a carrier's SafeStat inspection history and accident information and disseminates this information to enforcement personnel at the roadside. Plus, SAFER exchanges PRISM safety information collected in each state with other participating states.

We all know that many of you already take truck safety very seriously – carriers want to maintain a level playing field where they can compete fairly, and the traveling public simply wants all unsafe trucks and drivers off the road. As a registration tool, PRISM provides yet another incentive for marginally safe carriers to attain full safety compliance or be eliminated from our highways. In fact, PRISM might help convince the public once and for all that commercial carriers in Montana are fully committed to safety.

Although no Montana funding is needed to implement PRISM, the 2003 Legislative Session does need to authorize use of the system. Now is the time to share your questions and opinions on this matter, and I encourage you to do so by contacting Drew Livesay at the Montana Department of Transportation at 406-444-7638. As always, ensuring the safety of our traveling public continues to be a key component of staying "on track with MDT."

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